The Rat Collection

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The Rat Collection: Ceiling Cracks

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With lots of love to
Oscar, my best friend.

Chapter One

At the table was the family of four, eating their toast and eggs served on plates painted with dainty clustering flowers and curls of foliage. Grandmother Georgia pinches at the little girl spreading honey over her toast, and in a voice so sweet, she asks,

"Are you excited for our outing today, little miss Georgia,"

"Yes, ma'am, I am," the little girl exclaimed, "do ya think we'll see any whales and crabs?"

"I most certainly hope we do," was the reply.

The family finished their breakfast, set the dirty dishes in the sink to soak (there are more important matters than washing right now), then packed their wicker basket with a lunch of jam sandwiches cut to triangles, and fruit tarts baked the night before; they packed apples, boiled eggs, and little butter and lemon biscuits, then covered it with a

folded up gingham, and they left without me. Leaving me alone only to think of what a wonderful thing it must be, to go to a beach. Grandmother Georgia and little Georgia, mother Beth and father John. Grandmother Georgia would hold little Georgia's hand as they descend off the dock and onto the hot sands beneath their feet, the sweet girl marveling then at the sea and wondering how far it stretches. Forever, it seems, and though it is a perfect curvature you must wonder how far it really curves, and what an incredible thing it must be then to observe the islands and ships rising or getting lost in the horizon as so many sailors and sea captains would go on to sing or to scrawl in the margins of their notes. White birds would be flying across the sky while some perch on the rocks edging the waters, and in good humor, Grandmother Georgia and Little Georgia would offer a share of bread crusts for them to peck. All just above the gentle thrushes of waves, pulling in new piles of shells to lay atop the crusts already brought in, and whatever lies loose will be thrushed again beneath the waves. These seashells are all treasures. Perfect roundness of pinks and whites, purples and deep blues, rippled and textured; others smoothed either by anatomy of the creature it once housed or beneath the waves it lost all grit it could have had. All little things to fit in the palm of a sweet little hand that shifts through the sands and unthinking yet to cherish as souvenirs. But her

father John knows perfectly well what sentiment they have and compliments his daughter on the beautiful shells she has found. John, such a kind gentleman fitting of fatherhood and his only troubles are to wonder what his sweetest Beth has cooking upon her stove top, he would warn little Georgia to not venture too far into the ocean for fear of getting swept away. Grandmother Georgia and mother Beth would sit on a red and white gingham blanket, folding back the lid of their basket, and divvying out their lunch. It would be a wonderful day for a wonderful family, the only I have ever known, and it is the only way I can imagine such a family to be.

But I cannot join them. I must unlatch the square wooden trap situated beneath me, unfolding the ladder to let me go below, and then climb down where the hallway starts and the bedroom doors stand between wall hung portraits of family new and old; some so stiff from the years when people sat serious and stuffed with dust, and some candid in a garden sitting upon an ornamented iron lawn chair and drinking from a fluted teacup and on their heads are large brimmed hats decorated with flowers and ribbons. I step upright onto the neatly lined floor and stretch my aching legs that beg to be either moved or unscrewed from their sockets and discarded. My bindle is untied when I reach the living room, this room I always observe from so far and can

now interact so closely. This room with a fireplace in the middle, meeting with an old rocking chair embellished with a heart shaped carving upon its headrest and each surface is canvas to hand painted lavenders—and in this chair is where grandmother Georgia sits, tugging a yarn ball from her large wicker bowl, knitting with fast clicking wooden needles upon some half finished shawl in the morning and a blanket completed by supper. I seat myself at the couch where mother Beth sits and works at her cross stitchings; verses from the bible that father John reads most every night; and outlining the romantic swirls of these verses are where she ornaments with flowers and birds in flight, of animals at rest and supper tables set with feast. Wooden horses and little fabric dolls with painted faces are strewn about the rug which matches the curtains, and the curtains which match the upholstery. Every stitch is deliberate and neat, to last through the lifetime of this family and into the next if continued to be cared for well. I take a book out from my bindle. It was some boorish magazine I wish I hadn't read, so it goes back on the shelf from where it was missing—unnoticed, because it has now been returned—and I search again upon this shelf for any musings to entertain my lengths of seclusive bore. I picked up a nature journal, shifted through for a short while and saw all that I could see, and I put it in my bindle. Into the

kitchen. Well-stocked cabinets always greeted my constant hunger pangs. All the empty cans I had acquired are replaced with what can be scrounged: gravies, fruits, and soups. Gravies, fruits, and soups. Gravies, brown and muddy and meaty; fruits, unfresh and soaked in their own brines; soups, cold and brothy. I slice off a crust of bread from the counter, and from the lukewarm tea kettle on the stove top I pour a cup of tea and sweeten it with sugar, stirred with syrup, and topped with honey. I drank it completely, refilling it then to stretch the remnanting tea leaves further than they ought to go. My bread was eaten with a spread of butter and jam. But what I hungered for most of all were the apples sat in the porcelain bowl upon the counter. Red and round, no bigger than a fist and shiny without any blemish or bruise. I took a bite. I took another. My heart fluttered. Tart or sweet, I couldn't taste to tell. It was both, or perhaps neither; it was crisp and it was fresh, and my stomach yearned for it more than my tongue could allow to taste it. A second apple gets put into my bindle, and I take out my odd collection of jars. Each is filled with water from the basin, the lids screwed on tight and each drop of it is treated as sacred. My hands and face are washed. I unbutton my shirt, and scrub further until the grime no longer festers and fouls.

All within a perfectly empty house. I tie my bindle back up, and look

around now from this angle to what I recognize to be the souvenirs of their lives all collected into these few rooms I spend so little time in but know each of their tiny little movements that echo through the walls. I look outside the window, past the curtains and past the panes, where the weather is so fair and the sky is so blue and all the plumes of clouds and all the branches of the trees are swaying in the gentle driftings of a breeze. I stretch my legs. Only in this little time I am so free and unafraid of disturbances. I must return from where I came, now or later, but inevitably and eventually. I do not belong here. And I will live in a perfect silence, as unwanted dust upon the shelf that tarnishes their souvenirs.

Chapter Two

"Come here, John, would you please," said mother Beth.

"Yes, darling, but I'm due for work," was the reply. He kisses little Georgia on her forehead and pets her curls.

"I cannot find my can of peaches anywhere," she said, "Look, oh, I swear it was right here. You were with me when I bought it, and you saw me put them away."

"Perhaps it got misplaced, or perhaps we've got mice,"

"Mice!" Beth exclaimed, "Have you ever heard of a mouse running off with whole cans?! Oh, John, I'm going mad. Things are always disappearing. I say, we should take it up with the landlord right this instant and tell him all about this."

"Darling," cooed John and he placed a kiss upon his lady wife's flustered cheek, then another upon her hand, "I will stop by Sylvester's after work and get us some more cans. Everything seems to turn up, don't you worry. I must leave now, I love you terribly." and he goes with his leather case in hand to scrawl pen onto paper all day in some little office at some little law firm.

The mother rummages further through the cabinet, searching for any trace or sign of tampering and there is none that she will find. Frustrated, she closes the cabinet door and resumes with her baking. Adding flour into a bowl and stirring in eggs, sugar, and some other few ingredients, until it becomes a batter to be poured into a round dish and baked in the oven. It smelled heavenly. Through the musts of the attic, puncturing through each splintered crevice is the scent of vanilla filling up my small space. Oh, what I would give for just a bite of that cake. I watched through a crack more intently than before. Beth continued her daily chores, dusting and wiping beneath each knickknacks upon each shelf until it came time to check the cake some thirty odd minutes later. It came out as a risen cloud upon a baking dish, and it was flipped over and out to cool upon the counter.

"I wished to serve this with fruit, have a lovely dessert for ourselves, but seeing as I can't find it I guess we'll have to wait until this evening.

Said Mother Beth, returning to her chores with a bucket and mop this time.

"You always make such lovely desserts," commented grandmother Georgia, looking up from her knitting and not missing a stitch.

"When will it be ready?" asked little Georgia, she nods up from her knitting then quickly back down. She works slowly and concentrated as it trails closer to the ground with uneven, inconsistent stitches.

Their conversations continued. Rambling about some odd little things, then sitting in a comfortable silence when the work is done. It is a beautiful silence, each person in a little world of their own yet intertwined by each other's familiar presence.

They ate the cake, without fruit, after lunch. I watched them eat. I watched them grab their things—mother Beth wore her small brimmed hat, little Georgia wore a large bow tying curls behind her head, and grandmother Georgia with her walking stick and shawl tight around her shoulders—and I watched them leave. The key clicked in the lock behind them, then there was nothing to fill the air but silence. Silence, and the smell of that cake sitting upon the counter. Just a taste, then I will return. Just a taste, and I will return as dust. The smallest of slivers was cut; not the littlest of mice politely pecking on their share nor a malocclusioned rat, snarling rabid and sick, could have asked for a

smaller crumb than what I have taken, and I have eaten it. It was soft. It was fresh. It was just a taste, for the weak and the meager, the damned and the dishonest, and if there is ever a heaven of forgiveness and understanding to shine upon those sorry souls, it would be this cake set upon their plates. There will be cherubs in the clouds, pulling back strings on their harps to play a sound no composer on this Earth could put to paper though they may try, but never can perfect as mortals are not yet perfect beings. This cake was made by mortal hands; from the flours and the butters, the vanilla and eggs, all combined into a pan and baked, and with a mortal tongue it was eaten whole. I devoured it. And if there is a hell, it will be met at the barrel of a musket when I am at last to face the consequences of my miserable life as a rat.

The door handle jiggled. A key enters the lock. It shakes, and I run. Into the attic and I pull the ladder up. I shut the latch and set it against the nail keeping it locked. I shuffle to the other side, I lay just above where the dining room meets the parlor, and it connects both ways to the kitchen. The mother and grandmother come in, then the child with a handful of flowers and some scattered through her braids.

"Good heavens!" exclaimed mother Beth. She looks around frantically, opened palms turning to fists and she shakes them in the air. "Who did this?! Such a terrible thing. Could a rat have done this, is a rat

capable of running off with an entire cake?"

Grandmother Georgia places a hand on mother Beth's shoulder,

"Elizabeth, dear, this is awful. I say we go over to Sylvester's now and pick up some traps and poison. See how they'll like your cooking after that."

Mother Beth stifles, "You didn't do this, did you, little Georgia? You haven't been doing bad?" she asks, not accusatory but with caution.

"No, mama," was the reply.

"It most certainly was not little Georgia," grandmother Georgia protested, "she was the first to leave and the last to come in. You don't blame my little Georgia, she would never."

"I'm sorry, mama," said little Georgia, handing mother Beth a daisy with a petal already fallen off.

Mother Beth smiles and accepts it kindly. She grabs a thin necked vase from the cupboard and fills it with water, then sets little Georgia's handfuls of daisies into it to be admired.

"Let's worry about the traps tonight. I have another cake to bake. Will you help me with this one, little Georgia," asked mother Beth, "you can measure the flour, I'll teach you how." and that they did.

Another cake is mixed together as it was before. Just a few simple ingredients that were easily replaced but so rare in my diet. I have done

a terrible thing today. I caused grief to a family and they do not think to blame me for it though I have caused all their trouble. I lean deeper into my little crevice, peeking more fully at what I can see. A board creaks. It echoes through the walls, and the family pauses to look up. I hide. Mother Beth picks up a broom and whacks at the ceiling with the handle.

"Bastard old rats!" she yelled. I had never heard her yell before. She bangs at the ceiling, only the wooden boards stopping the broom from puncturing through to my torso. It stops. There is an observant silence. It dragged longer than it should have. I lay still. Mother Beth harrumps and continues at last with her baking, and the grandmother taps her knitting needles with as much ferocity as before. I remain still. Through the rest of the evening, I remained still. Father John returned home at dinner with stories of his day at the firm, and mother Beth told him of the incident. The family wound down for the night, John read passages of his bible and I, just above, heard clearly his sobering voice. He spoke of stories as they were written; of kings who met tragic ends by their greed, of fathers who loved and forgave though their sons had betrayed them. Then, father John picked up tired little Georgia and carried her to bed, where he tucked her in and kissed her goodnight. Grandmother Georgia retired in that same nursery, sharing the bed with her little

friend; and mother and father slept in the room just across and where my attic doesn't allow any visibility through the ceiling cracks. I lay still in this silence until it is filled by the deep, droning snores of a family in rest. I move my fingers, slightly little motions of empty branches swayed by a breeze. I move my fingers until I can move my wrists, the stiffness pervasive still in my arms. I rotate my ankles until my knees can bend again, and at last I can slug over to my nesting of fabric scraps and spoiled crusts. And I lay still, my head down on the pile and I lay this time to meet an uncomfortable slumber.

Chapter Three

It must be Sunday, when little Georgia goes off to attend school in a church and grandmother Georgia joins along. It leaves Beth and John to their lonesome. John teases the hem of her skirt, slowly rising until his hand touches her thigh, and it is in these moments I realize why I stay despite the danger and the strife. I am in love with them completely. John kisses her cheek and she giggles a snorty sort of way. His hand ventures deeper through her skirt, and she is so well humored in his doing so.

"We had better not," she said.

John stops without question. Beth rubs her stomach.

"I have a familiar feeling, the same I had felt with little Georgia. My love, we are so blessed."

"Darling!" John exclaims, reaching to hold her hands and kissing each of her knuckles, then burying himself upon her bodice. "Thank you, lord, thank you for this wonderful gift. Does your mother know? When should we tell little Georgia,"

"Maybe in another week. She'll have questions, such a curious little dear, what should we say if she asks,"

John thinks for a moment.

"Tell her that I kiss you every morning and every night, and that we love each other so much that it is the Lord's will."

Beth smiles and swirls her fingers through John's curls.

"What should we name them? It can't be George, we have quite enough Georgias in this house."

"Winnifred is a beautiful name, as is Jane. Jane and Georgia. Or Elizabeth,"

"You're a fool," laughed Beth, "grandmother Georgia and little Georgia, and now you suggest a missus Elizabeth and little Elizabeth. But that is if they're a girl, for a boy I'm partial to Richard, after my grandfather. Finis would be after your father."

"Let's think about it," said John. He eases into Beth's lap and sprawls across like a cat. He is perfectly obedient and dedicated to his lady wife, every word she speaks is his law and he adores the ground she walks.

She continues playing with his hairs, stroking with a lover's gentle grace. They hold each other's hand and twirl fingerprints along each other's palm. They wish to stay here forever.

"Charles," said Beth at last.

"I was thinking of Edward," was the reply.

"Edward is nice. Little Georgia and Eddie, Georgia and Charlie," she mused.

John agrees. They close their eyes and drift off into a calmness; not quite a slumber and not quite awake. The feeling of being perfectly content that is so rare in life but easily found; of friends between lovers enjoying company and musings of what is and what will be. To imagine their oldest child growing old with a friend they will forever keep, and the trouble they will get into as they grow together. Perhaps the family will move somewhere that allows them to grow, on a farm with tall grasses and geese to peck bundles of flowers out of little Georgia's hand. Cats for the children to chase, and chickens return the chasing. They will wake up every morning to spread corn kernels and bits of bread and seed out for the chickens, and every afternoon before supper they will brush the horse's hair into a smooth mane. Little Georgia would want to decorate it with flowers and bows, the house would be ill humored and shake them out. There could be a birdbath set between stones and

beneath a tree, just across from the porch where grandmother Georgia sits and knits from her rocking chair. An image of a still American life across the turn of the century. To get away from this nowhere city, and move further nowhere. There would be no work but manual labor, none that John is equipped with after sitting behind a desk writing legal documents as a tired old clergyman signing off realtor dealing and marriage certificates. What do simple country folks need with lawyers, pen pushers who sign you into debts and despair, who work with banks to keep your pockets empty and theirs full. He was born in this busy nowhere-city, and he will die a busy nowhere-man. But he will have lived such a good life, as such an honest man to be praised for his humor and charisma. To have been loved so completely and to have loved his family with his whole being. Eating his breakfast of biscuits and gravy, which he helped to make, drinking his coffee and telling his little one to be good in her studies—she might be a solicitor, too someday—and to kiss his lady wife before he leaves, anticipating the return home when they can kiss again and recite their day to each other with such enthusiasm over the little things; over the hard hammering boss, the newspaper blues, the fools of the office, and mice in the gardens, the jokes told by an associate, and the details written in the margins of an old cookbook; all the littlest of minutest things combining the past

hours into the present between the lips of two lovers who dore at the sound of each other's voice. They're glad that they exist together. It is a good life to live.

I am part of their day as I am here, I am the listener above the ceiling beams and further steeped into the recesses where they can never find me. I will die a rat writhing upon the crusts of its own waste before I can be loved.

Chapter Four

I must remain silent. I take my can opener and bring it around the top radius of the can. I fork out the bits of gravy, peeling the lid back further to allow room to drink it directly. It's cold and soggy, and the only different taste from the sour mustiness of my hovel. It must be the start of autumn, there hasn't been a hot day yet. The chill evades every crevice of this poorly insulated room, and I am grateful for the goosebumps upon my limbs after the inescapable humidity of summer spent in a dutch oven, or in the deepest pits of a swamp where mangroves block out all light and the moisture keeps a perpetual state of sogginess. I drank much water in these times but it never quenched my thirst. I removed my garments that were drenched in sweat and I wrung them into my jars but they filled up to a quarter and no more no

matter how much I tried. Fluid could be sustained further by relieving myself into them, not a drop could be wasted so long as it could salviate my dry tongue through the sharp salt. The goosebumps upon my skin are joyous, the shiver to follow is a humble reminder of what was and I will not complain yet of what is to come. I refuse to cover myself with fleece. This chill will soon turn bitter, and my body will beg for any candle or any spare matchstick for any source of heat that it could be worth for any little while, but here I must stay in my own shiver.

I made a grave mistake eating mother Beth's cake. The family left after their breakfast; the table was cleaned but bread sat on a single platter upon the table. Was it forgotten? Will it be missed? I asked myself then, unknowing if I should stay or descend for it. Pangs are persistent. I clammered to it, took a bite of this already buttered slice, and a pungency struck my stomach into knots and my tongue curled in on itself to evade the taste. Poison! I realized it to be. It was spat and I washed into the basin, scrubbing and clawing long nails into myself to rid the stain and I clawed still until blood stung. I grab a can, checking for any tampering and when I found it to be secure I grabbed another and checked it all the same until I had three more cans than before and I took them with me up the ladder and closed the trap flush against the ceiling. I don't know how much longer I can go. I should have swallowed

the poison. My stomach churns ill, I think I might die, but an obscure cruelty doesn't let me do so yet. I am a pest, a rat to be crushed in the gnarl of a fist and tossed to the maggots to nest in my decay until I am just bones and a black stain. The winter will soon set in, avalanching the streets and preventing any life to move forward. I read my books. These pages are my only company excepting the conversations I overhear, and deep into the gutter margins is where I hunker down for the long winter.

I waited... I watched... I listened...

A grandmother passed away sick and left behind baby blankets and little sweaters that were made all through the months leading up to her final bedridden day. I saw a mother anticipating and a child born between Christmas and the new calendar year. A father held his new daughter, cooing at her fresh face without blemish and blessed with the same brown eyes that her grandmother had left.

My supplies are dwindling.

I heard the child cry through the night and be soothed back to sleep in the arms of mother and father, and I watched little Georgia keep attentive to her knitting; doing just as she has been taught. Her stitches became neater and she was creating what she couldn't before; in her

ninth year she finished a blanket from the yarns left to her and she gifted it to her mother and father on Christmas day. It gave warmth in this coldest winter, while each little chill pervades through each crevice of my recess and bites at my fingertips. I cover myself in fleece. On the few trips I could, I recovered more fabric scraps from the quilting bin to add to my nesting; little bits of strings and a couple lengths of wool, all keeping my heart beating. At last I opened my can of peaches—the very same peaches I had stolen from the cake all those months ago—and I pecked at the uppermost layer of ice that froze within the can. I ate it and cringed at the cold tingling in my warm mouth. The slimy peach wriggled onto my fork, and it tasted metallic. I drank the stagnated liquid all the while wishing it could have been fresher and sweeter. I must fall asleep and dream of the sweetness I crave. Musings of peaches fill my head, orchids where they grow in neat lines by the hundreds all in the Georgia farmlands and their fuzzy bodies plucked right off the stem and eaten then. Peach jams and peach pies. Peach tarts and peach kisses, and all the hospitable southern charms offering peach tea. I should have moved south. Perhaps I still can. In the spring, I will leave and hitch a stranger's carriage until they take me past the hills of old virginia and beyond the lakes and further still until the crop fields grow tucked into fenced lands. I would take a peach, as fresh and sweet as I

could ever hope it to be, and bite into it with the juices—sticky and sugary—sticking to my palm and smothered into my cheek. I would go to the farmers and ask for a job, my pay would be a dime and I could live in the loft of a barn if they'd have pity on a poor soul. Wake up before the sun and pick the peaches and put them in my wicker basket until the sun tells me to stop for lunching with my lady or gentle love, whoever they may be. We could talk of the puddles and the frogs, and the little birds nesting in the trees. If a rat, deserving only to eat poisoned crumbs and think of it as dinners served on the painted little plates of the versailles, could live a life honest then perhaps there may still be a life worth living for the naked and shivering. All I have is my little can of peaches and the metal tasting juices all on my fingers to lick off as I lull deeper into these dreams.

If I die before I wake, I pray to the lord my soul to take.

Chapter Five, I

I force myself to relieve into my jar. I drink it, the warmth is fleeting. The snow is heavier still. The whole world was set upon a shelf, time moved so slowly as no practical means of work could be done. Everyone stayed home for a week or maybe more. Father John returned to his employ when weather permitted but he hadn't yet come home. The day came and dragged unbusy as it has all through the storm and supper was halted a few hours until they were sure he wasn't coming. Children now lay asleep in their nursery, mother Beth snores. I hold my hand overtop of the latch. I have never gone this long before. My collection of cans have scraped clean, my mouth begs for water. If I can wait until spring, I can live anew. Winter is set so deeply. I am weak and

struggle to undo the latch from the protruding nail, the rusted and crooked thing is the only separation between myself and the world. It creaks at the hinges and I stop. I listen. I peek down, the children are asleep. Another snore comes from Beth. I pull the hatch again. I want out. Lord, I want out! I want out! I'm trapped! I'll be frozen in my own biles! I kick at it, and at last it flies open and bangs itself into the folding ladder. I pull it back up. I listen. The children are asleep and Beth is undisturbed still. I pull the hatch back down slowly, as to not make a sound. Slower. The ladder softly taps against the floor below and I make my descent one fragile step at a time. Beneath the pads of my feet, the neatly lined floorboards became splintering glass threatening to shatter into thousands of shards. I scuttle to the kitchen and take the cans; as many as I can carry and an extra more. I stick my head into the basin like a cow and drink as much as I can of this water, uncaring even to taste if it were clean or dirty or tasted of soap. I hurry back to my hovel, set the cans on my nesting, quietly one at a time. Each ruffling of the blankets behind their closed doors and each asleeped groaning is a musket firing through the dark. I grab my jars and bring them down, I fill them with water and I screw the lids on tight as I make my way back. It's almost over now. I sit crouched in my attic and pull up the ladder. Thank you, god! I prayed. A blessing at last for a miserable rat! Reaching

for the handle now.

Oh, god!

A can is knocked by my knee and tumbled down the ladder rungs and landed at last on the floor with a final dreadful, bellowing bang and its din echoed further within the empty hall. I slam the hatch and hold it tight. Silence.

"Johnny," groaned Beth. I can hear her rising, fumbling with her blankets and nightstand drawers.

"Georgia," she called out, expecting an answer and there was none anyone could give. "Georgia, are you up?"

Footsteps come from the bedroom into the hall. A single candle flickers through the crevices of the ceiling. She pokes her head into the nursery and finds Georgia asleep in her bed; the little baby in their crib. Beth stops with her gaze fixed down the hall. She appears so small, the familiar walls contort into the unpredicting darkness and only consume her further the longer she stays. She thinks, blinking at the darkness and waiting for it to blink back. The key clicks in the lock, the handle is jiggled to ensure it's shut. I peek down. Beth sits at the corner nursing chair in statue; aiming a little pistol at the door. She waits. I refuse to move. I hate to breathe any breath for fear of making any noise. We can hear each other's tiny little movements, absorbed whole by who will be

first to make a sound. We wait. There is nothing else to do but wait in this stifling silence.

Chapter Five, II

The sun has at last risen, bright but lacking warmth, and the front door opens just behind it.

"Darling," announced a familiar voice.

They follow their routine of setting down a luggage of work papers, taking off his shoes and unbuttoning a long coat. He washes his hands in the basin, then his face.

"I'm sorry for not returning home. We were up to the waists and frozen in. I tried but they wouldn't let me leave, we all stayed. Told me to wait a day before coming back to the office, let the men shovel out some more. Beth, are you awake?"

He walks down the hall, accidentally kicks the dented can on the floor. He steps into his shared bedroom, door slightly ajar.

"Darling," he says again. No answer. He walks faster to the nursery

and is stopped by the lock. He bangs at the wood with a closed fist.

"Georgia, it's me. Anybody in here?"

A scream comes from the other side.

"Beth!" He cried, forcing the door now with his weight.

The handle rattles from within. He shouts with more urgency, meeting with the voice just beyond the door telling him to cease. He backs away and the door opens at last. Facing now to Beth—unbalanced to hold her own, hair frayed into knots from her braids and eyes too heavy to even look upon her love—she falls into his arms.

"Don't you ever stay late again!" she cried, "Oh, it was awful. I was so frightened. There was a noise in the night, I thought it was a burglar."

John hugged her tightly,

"A burglar! My love, are you hurt? Are our children safe? I'm so sorry." he kissed her forehead and wiped strands of hair behind her ear. He looks into the room where his children lay. His love is escorted to their room, where he tells her that they are safe, and that he is here beside her now as she lays tucked in.

He again checks on little Georgia and his little babe, kisses them both on their forehead as they sleep unaware, then in the parlor he looks between each antique shelf and all of the decorated plates upon their display; in the kitchen he opens every drawer that holds the silverwares,

and searches behind cabinet doors for bone porcelain and a piece of shine, and each item looks back at him. All the portraits are neatly hung in their place on the wall, the cross stitchings between them are tight and undisturbed. He checked the windows, closed by curtains to keep in the heat, and they are intact as they always have been. There is nothing out of any sort, except the one can he hadn't realized that he kicked, and it read on the label: Mushrooms. He turns it over, thinking and observing. There is nothing to suggest it is spoiled or rotten, no tampering of any sort that a little rat was biting at the seal, excepting the dent in the side.

He cooks an omelet decorated with mushrooms and lightly salted just as it's preferred, and he brings it to his wife with a hot cup of tea. He wakes up Georgia, gets her dressed for the day, and cooks her breakfast when she's ready for it.

"Where is mama," she asked,

"She's sleeping. She was very brave last night, and now she needs to rest." was the reply. The day continued slowly after breakfast. Firewood was kept burning, John went through the documents from his case to keep busy in this time off. Beth slept, and when John got tired of his work, he retired next to his dear ladywife all before noon, holding her and keeping safe and warm. Little Georgia climbed onto the bed,

burying herself into the quilt and further between the parents, unaware still of what had transpired last night. But she knows she is loved, and she is safe. They are warm and well-fed.

I should have been shot and allowed to bleed until I pussed at the wound. I should have fallen down and twisted my neck between the ladder rungs and left to hang. I should have banged and yelled, I'm up here! and stared her in the eyes as she searched for the commotion. What would she have done, just the two of us then. I was silent and meek and I am rewarded by living another day of claustrophobia heavied by my own sick.

Chapter Five, III

I lay in my hovel. My body is pricked all over by bald headed devils with their pitchforks and poking at my miserable decay. I feel a warmth come over me, from the first instance of spring or the fires of hell starting around me I wouldn't know. But I close my eyes and let the muses of either become a comfort; whichever brings me closer to Georgia, I must go to it. And gone I must have went. Frozen in place in this terrible little attic. Upon my bedding of stolen scraps and crusts of soil and all things vile, I lay draped in a blanket that doesn't belong to me; stomach empty with food that I earned. Cans that could have sustained me longer were strewn along at my shoeless feet, and the jars that held water were again filled with piss. I must become dust when the

weather warms, I cannot decay when the winter keeps me preserved. Please let me die and become nothing. I want my bones to crumble at the lightest touch, collapsing into a miserable pile of dust to be forgotten.

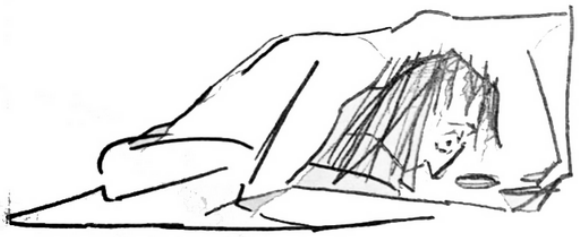
The ending of my life is only a nauseating smell and a black stain marked upon the ceiling. I am discovered at last by John when he forces the latch by axe, then the constables come to assess the hovel and drag my cadaver away in an undignified little sack that did not keep me all in one piece.

"Three years," a constable remarked to the family and crowds huddled behind publishing journals, "A man living in an attic for three years, it must've been. He was to be charged all those years ago but was never found and brought to trial. See here, this slip- found in the resting place beneath the skin, his draft papers."

I was remarked to have weighed ninety pounds. Skin stretched thinly over bone and wrinkled upon the muscles. Gums blackened and hair thin, with eyes pupil-less and turned to thick gush within my sockets between the freeze and the first thaw of spring.

Of all the little apartment houses on the square, it was by chance that their window was open and none were home. I wish I could have

lived to see the spring and all of the flowers budding on the peach trees.



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